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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of mentoring for mature African American women during their reentry college experience. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 women (mean age 41.7 years) about their current educational experiences, occupational and professional goals, support networks, and family commitments, multiple roles, and concerns about role overload. Eight of the women reported having a mentor. The mentors included former/current bosses, professional colleagues, friends, and relatives. Mentoring activities reported included having mentors provide advice/direction regarding professional development, provide educational/spiritual/personal support, offer advice on financial matters, and support academic/scholastic concerns. When asked about their perception of the "ideal" mentor, most of the women provided fairly detailed descriptions of what they desired in such an individual. Most of the women interviewed perceived having mentors as somewhat to very important in terms of facilitating their personal growth and development, their educational growth, and their career success. (Contains 13 references.) (MDM)

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The Role of Mentoring in the College Experiences of Mature African American Women: A Qualitative Investigation

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The Role of Mentoring in the College Experiences of Mature African American Women: A Qualitative Investigation

Since the late 1970s, mentoring has gained increasing popularity as a mechanism for change, a tool for academic and occupational acculturation, and as an effective means of empowerment. In particular, mentoring has been found effective in retaining college students (Youn, 1992); enhancing professional development of college students (Smith & Davidson, 1992); and in aiding traditional and non-traditional women students in recognizing their potential and realizing maximum benefits from their college experiences (Dannells, Rivera, Knall-Clark, 1992). Mentors also provide psychosocial assistance by bolstering protege confidence and affirming the protege's self-worth (Scandura, 1992; Wilson, 1993).

With the passage and implementation of Civil Rights legislation, African American women have made some gains in the professional workforce. Increasing numbers of black women who have not gained full entry into professional positions are opting to return to college (in their late 20s and beyond) for the educational credentials that they believe will help them transition into professional occupations (Thomas, Chaudhry, Hailey & Munford, 1994).Given the dearth of literature that has examined the role of mentoring in the educational and occupational lives of black women in general, and African American reentry women in particular, the current investigation is timely. Through an examination of data collected via in-depth, qualitative interviews from a sample of black reentry women, this paper will describe the role of mentoring for mature African American women during their reentry college experience. This paper will also report the womens' descriptions of an "ideal" mentor and the perceived importance of a mentor in various life domains.

Profile of African American Reentry College Women

The term "reentry women" refers to women who did not complete college at the traditional age. These women typically dropped out to start families and have decided to

continue their education after an absence ranging from a few years to as many as 35 years (Lewis, 1988). Since the late 70s, scholars have been reporting that reentry women have become the fastest growing segment of students attending college in the United States (Women's College Coalition, 1989). And, according to Padula (1994), colleges and universities should prepare for continued growth among this population of students.

The profile of the reentry college women is vastly different today than in the 1970s. Reentry women include a growing number of African Americans who appear to view education as a viable strategy to meet personal and economic needs (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective, 1983). In fact, the Digest of Education Statistics (1994) reported that 751,000 African American women over 25 years were enrolled in undergraduate institutions. In Thomas (1996), black women who returned to college, in contrast to their white female counterparts, were more often in midlife, unmarried, single parents, employed in low paying jobs. The role of a "mentor" in the lives of such women is unknown at the present time.

II. Objective & Research Questions

The primary objective of this qualitative study was to increase our knowledge of mentoring in the college experiences of mature African American women. Specific questions of interest include:

(1) Do African American reentry college women have mentors? If so, who are their mentors and in what ways are they mentored?

(2) Have African American reentry women had mentors in the past? If yes, why did the mentoring relationship end?

(3) What is the perception of an "ideal" mentor for African American reentry college women?

(4) How important is having a mentor perceived by African American reentry women in facilitating: (1) personal

growth and development; (2) educational growth; and (3) career success?

(5) Do African American reentry college women anticipate a significant shift in occupational status upon completion of college? If yes, how and in what ways is she facilitating this shift?

(6) Do African American reentry women anticipate barriers in career growth after graduating from college? If yes, what are these barriers and why do they anticipate them?

III. Method

Research Participants

The sample in the current study are 19 African American women who originally participated in a larger mail survey investigation concerning the educational and vocational aspirations of reentry college women in 1993. Participants in the original study consisted of a random sample of women currently enrolled in a weekend college program designed to support employed, mature women returning to college. Black women represented 42.6% (or n=57) of participants (N=147) in the original investigation.

Instruments

The instrument consisted of an interview protocol containing four sections which, broadly speaking, ascertained information regarding the women's: (1) current educational experiences; (2) occupational and professional goals; (3) support networks; and (4) family commitments, multiples roles, and concerns about role overload. An additional section was included for women who may have graduated since the original study. This section sought the women's advice for other mature African American women considering reentry as well as information regarding any changes in the participants' professional lives since graduating.

Procedures

The procedure utilized in the investigation entailed contacting the subset of 57 black women who participated in the original Reentry Study in 1993. The women were

mailed letters that introduced the current investigation as "Phase II" of the 1993 study designed to follow-up the original participants by examining the educational and vocational experiences of mature African American college women. They were informed that this investigation consisted of face-to-face interviews designed to be approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length.

Once the women agreed to participate in the follow-up, they were contacted by telephone to set up a convenient time for the interview. Interview responses were recorded by hand by the interviewer. Interviews were also tape-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the hand-recorded information. Note that prior to telephoning willing participants, all interviewers participated in a training session. Participants received $20.00 for a completed interview.

IV. Results

Description of the Sample

This investigation consisted of 19 mature African American women who previously participated in the 1993 Reentry Women's Study. The mean age of the sample was 41.7 years. The vast majority of the women (n=17) reported being currently employed. Hence, most of the participants were juggling family, work, and educational obligations. Education emerged as the most frequently mentioned (n=10) single most important aspect of the womens' lives, followed by family (n=7) and work (n=2). Six of the participants had graduated from college since the original study. See Table 1 for demographic profile of the sample.

Prevalence of Mentoring Relationship Among Black Reentry Women

The research participants were asked a number of questions around mentoring (See Table 2 for actual items). Eight of the participants (N=19) reported having a mentor. The mentors included former/current bosses (n=2), professional colleagues (n=2), friends

(n=2), or relatives (n=2). Of the women who had mentors, the ways in which they were mentored fell into four distinct categories. These categories include: (1) providing advice/direction regarding career/professional development; (2) providing emotional/spiritual/personal support; (3) offering advice on financial matters; and (4) assisting/supporting scholastic/academic concerns. Although not directly asked of the respondents, most indicated the gender of the mentor (3 female; 4 male) and some (n=4) indicated mentor ethnicity as black.

Some of the responses regarding the ways in which the women are mentored including the following:

> *"She offers advice on career moves; dealing with my husband; suggestions on how to make ends meet on financial matters; and how to cope when I am feeling down."*

> *"I always discuss things with [my mentor] because I respect his opinion. He also gives me emotional and spiritual support."*

> *"He mentors me professionally and scholastically. Professionally he gives me a lot of information about what employers look for in candidates, how to look good on paper, and how to develop credentials, maintain a job, and do well in a job."*

> *"She is an excellent listener. She is an inspiration. She's enthusiastic and has the ability to see the positives in life and unique gifts that all [people] have to offer. She is very supportive and encourages me."*

> *"If I have a personal issue and am concerned with how to handle the problem, I call him for input. If I have report writing concerns, I fax him the document and he advises me. He gives me general knowledge and I views him as a wealth of knowledge."*

Many of the women (n=10) reported not having a mentor. Of these women, only three said they were previously in mentor-protege relationships. One former mentor was a former boss who modeled professionalism for the respondent. Another former mentor

was a college tutor who mostly offered academic support. A third former mentor was a friend who offered the respondent greater life "exposure," psychosocial support, and counseling. These mentoring relationships ended due to retirement, the termination of a class, and relocation

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Sample (N=19)

Characteristics	n
Number of participants in a marriage or live-in relationship	11
Number of participants in the same marriage/live-in relationship when participant initially returned to college	7
Number of participants employed as a paid workers	17
Number of women who see unique challenges for mature black reentry women	15
Number of women who reported membership/ affiliation in a professional organization related to career goals	8
Single most important aspect of womens' lives: Number of women citing:	
Education	10
Family	7
Work	2
Number of women anticipating occupational shifts after graduation	13
Number of women anticipating barriers to career growth	9
Number of women who have graduated since "Phase I"	6
Number of women whose professional lives have changed since graduation	4

Mean age of sample: 41.7 years

Table 2
Instrument Items Related to Mentoring

Item
1. Do you have a mentor? If yes, who is this person? In what ways does this person "mentor" you? Please be specific.
2. Have you ever had a mentor? If yes, who was this person? In what ways did this person "mentor" you? Please be specific. Why did the mentoring relationship end?
3. Rate how important you perceive having a mentor is in terms of facilitating your: Personal growth and development Educational growth Career success
4. What is your perception of an "ideal" mentor, that is, the specific qualities and characteristics you would desire in such an individual?

Perceptions of an "Ideal" Mentor

When asked, "What is your perception of an "ideal" mentor, that is, the specific qualities and characteristics you would desire in such an individual?," most of the women provided fairly detailed descriptions of what they desired in such an individual. The vast majority of responses (n=17) contained at least one but usually multiple references to psychosocial and spiritual support (e.g., being supportive, a good listener, boosting self-esteem of the protege) and/or character/personality traits (e.g., being intuitive, wise, honest, and compassionate). Only two women limited their responses to career-related support (e.g., having connections, being knowledgeable). Typical responses to this question include (See also Table 3):

> *"[An ideal mentor is] informative, honest, available, has professional connections, mature, and an expert in a specific area."*

> *"This person has experience, knowledge, compassion, and faith in the mentee."*

> *"This person is confident and successful at what they do. S/he is motivated for herself/himself and motivating for others. S/he is readily available and has common/similar past experiences [with protege]. S/he is able to deal with mentee on an equal level without being condescending. S/he can relate to the mentee's special needs and be fair."*

> *"[An ideal mentor is] a person who is open and gives information that they have. This individual is trustworthy and unafraid that you will grow past him/her. S/he will introduce you to appropriate people and facilitate hands on experience. S/he will give honest feedback, give responsibility, and allow creativity. S/he is a person you can talk to and have a friendship with as well."*

> *"A mentor should have consideration and concern for the protege. This individual should prãctice being patient---having the knowledge that the protege is learning and growing."*

"An ideal mentor is someone with similar experiences and in the same career field. She believes that without similar experiences, a mentor and protege would be coming from different places."

"Someone who is patient, willing to listen, and gives honest advice."

"An ideal mentor is an individual one can look up to, has a professional manner, is non-compromising, has no fear of speaking up when opinions differ from management, and would not sell his/her soul."

Table 3
Frequently Mentioned Qualities/Characteristics of an Ideal Mentor (N=19)

References to Psychosocial /Spiritual Support	References to Character/ Personality Traits
Available to protege	Integrity
Being a good listener	Honest
Being open	Mature
Someone who is a friend	Dedicated
Someone with good communication skills	Compassionate
Someone who shares	Similar backgrounds
Supportive	Someone who is fair
Motivating	Trustworthiness
Someone who guides	Intuitive
Raises self-esteem	
Someone who is spiritual/inspiring	

Perceived Importance of Having Mentors

The African American women studied were asked one closed-ended item around mentoring. Using the response alternatives of 1=Very Important; 2=Somewhat important; 3=Somewhat Unimportant; and 4=Very Unimportant, the participants were asked to rate how important they perceived having a mentor is in terms of facilitating their: (1) personal growth and development; (2) educational growth; and (3) career success.

In terms of the importance of a mentor with respect to personal growth and development, the median score was "2", with scores ranging from "1" to "4". Thus, the sample viewed mentoring as somewhat important in facilitating personal growth and development. A median score of "1" emerged in terms of perceived importance around educational growth (scores ranged from 1 to 3) while importance for career success yielded a median score of "1" (scores ranged from 1 to 4). Hence, these participants generally viewed having a mentor as somewhat to very important across the three life domains presented. See also Table 4.

Table 4
Perceived Level of Importance in Having a Mentor (N=19)

	Rating/# of Women			
	Very Impt.	Smewht. Impt.	Smewht. Unimpt.	Very Unimpt.
Facilitating personal growth & development	9	7	2	1
Facilitating educational growth	13	4	2	0
Facilitating career success	11	6	0	2

Mentoring & Career Transition Among Black Reentry Women

The present sample of reentry women were asked whether or not they anticipated experiencing a significant occupational shift upon graduation. They were also asked whether they perceived any barriers or obstacles in terms of their career growth. These questions are important to this study since mentors serve as key agents in facilitating career development and growth for their proteges. Thus, understanding the women's view of their anticipated occupational shifts and perceived potential barriers to career growth is important to understanding how mentoring can influence their current college experiences and future work plans.

Anticipated Occupational Shifts

More than half of the African American reentry participants (n=13) reported that they anticipate a significant occupational shift upon completion of the degree. These shifts typically related to: (1) advancement to higher level jobs (usually in the same organization); (2) increased salary; (3) shifting from non-professional to professional positions; (4) desires to move into a totally different career; and (5) entrepreneurial aspirations. Some of the women's responses include the following:

"Higher salary."

"When I finish, I will retire and be an entrepreneur."

"I hope to be working in a more professional capacity."

"I am now working in an office, but I aspire to move out of this into the teaching arena."

"I expect to get a promotion into a different career field. I did not really expect it to be in the same company, but it worked out that way."

"I will be working for myself and building wealth."

"By obtaining a more professional position."

When asked what kinds of things had been done or were currently being done to facilitate this shift, responses related to: (1) additional on-the-job training/tasks on the job (n=4); (2) networking with professionals/self-marketing (n=3); (3) involving herself in tasks/work/volunteerism related to career goals (n=3); (4) attending college and/or taking supplemental coursework at other colleges (n=3); and (5) other (n=3). Some women said:

"I have taken on additional on the job training."

"I am sending out resumes and networking with professionals in my field of interest."

"I have implemented two projects in my office."

"I have become a peer leader at [my college] and have had an active role working with youth."

"I am going to school and marketing myself."

"I am completing a health aid course at [another college] and will begin classes for a practical nurse aid program soon."

". . .now I assist in doing a daycare provider program. I actually go into a daycare provider's home and read, etc. once a month for children in the home with a trained professional."

The participants who did not anticipate any significant occupational shifts (n=6) reported so for three reasons: (1) planning to retire; (2) unsure of her career goals; and (3) racism as a barrier against significant occupational change.

Anticipated Barriers to Career Growth

Almost half the women surveyed (n=9) said that they believed they would encounter barriers or obstacles in terms of career growth after graduating. These

barriers/obstacles included: (1) racism (n=2); (2) lack of related job experience (n=1); (3) the need for a graduate degree (n=2); (4) a generally tough job market/economy (n=3); (5) age (n=1); and (6) family responsibilities (n=1).

When the women were asked why they felt this way, their responses fell into the following categories: (1) issues around social clock; (2) issues around locus of control; (3) economic issues; (4) employer demands for education plus experience; and (5) general life and/or on the job experiences. A few of the responses include:

> *"No matter how much I do people will always come up with something else as an excuse to keep me from gaining access to higher levels in a career."*
>
> *"A lot of employers want education PLUS experience for the kind of job I want to pursue."*
>
> *"Generally, because of the economy and the lack of job security there are barriers for everyone."*
>
> *"This is what life experiences have shown me."*
>
> *"The job market and my age."*
>
> *"I feel I am 'starting over again' in life."*

On the other hand, ten participants reported that they did not anticipate any barriers in terms of their career growth after graduating. These women reported feeling this way because of: (1) a generally optimistic outlook; (2) the development of skills to overcome barriers; (3) self-confidence in credentials, talents, and abilities; and (4) involvement in appropriate self-preparation. These women stated:

> *"I am preparing myself for where I need to go at the appropriate time."*

"I have learned to overcome barriers in terms of how to deal with people...being flexible."

"I feel that it will be a new start for me after graduation. If I have accomplished graduation, achievement in my career will happen."

"My managers are preparing me to accept higher responsibilities."

"As long as I look for opportunities, they will come my way if it is God's will."

"Barriers are to be expected because it is a continuation of what people do not know about me so they want to hold me back. I have learned to go around this."

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

In terms of the prevalence of mentoring among this sample of women, eight (8) of the nineteen women interviewed reported having a mentor-protege relationship. Interestingly, whether or not the women were in such a relationship did not change the salience of themes around psychosocial support as an important function of mentors. Among mentored participants, such themes and functions emerge significantly more often when they described the ways in which they were mentored as compared to career-related functions. This apparent value on the psychosocial aspects and benefits of the mentoring relationship may also be reflected in the non-professional source of the mentors (i.e., friends, relatives) for half of the mentored women. The present research participants placed greater emphasis on functions such as communication, boosting self-confidence, advising and counseling, and providing helpful feedback. Thus, these findings evidence further support for the notion that often times women perceive such functions as more important than men. Furthermore, given the multiple non-work/career responsibilities and burdens of black reentry women (school obligations, children, household duties, financial concerns, care of aging relatives, and stress related to maintaining intimate relationships)

important than men. Furthermore, given the multiple non-work/career responsibilities and burdens of black reentry women (school obligations, children, household duties, financial concerns, care of aging relatives, and stress related to maintaining intimate relationships) (Thomas, 1996), emotional/psychological support and encouragement might be particularly salient needs of these women as they push the boundaries of their lives in terms of their level of education and career possibilities.

All of the women interviewed shared their perceptions of an "ideal" mentor. As stated previously, the vast majority of responses placed substantial emphasis on the psychosocial aspects of the mentoring relationship. This focus probably reflects the need for such support among black reentry women. It may also reflect a less sophisticated knowledge regarding the comprehensiveness of this type of professionally-centered, helping relationship. For instance, very few of the mentored women mentioned that their mentors engaged them in projects, assignments, and other functions designed specifically to groom the protege along a particular career path. It may also suggest that managing their current "juggling act" (balancing the demands of work, school, and family) and the present salience of education among the women in this sample results in less immediate attention to issues around career transition and career development.

On the other hand, understanding the protege's needs from her own viewpoint is essential to the effectiveness of this relationship. In view of the scarcity of mentoring among women and ethnic minorities, the mentor's perceptions of the protege's needs may be less than accurate. Furthermore, without accurate knowledge of the protege's needs, the mentor is less capable of determining whether s/he can actually meet those needs.

Generally speaking, all of the women interviewed perceived having mentors as somewhat to very important in terms of facilitating their personal growth and development, their education growth, and their career success.

As one would expect, a large proportion (n=13) of the women reported an anticipated significant occupational shift after graduating from college. They indicated

that these shifts would include advancing to higher level jobs, moving from a non-professional to professional positions, entering into a totally new career, and embarking on entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, almost half of the sample (n=9) believed they would be confronted with barriers and obstacles in term of their career growth after graduating. These two factors also make the case for pairing these women with capable mentors. The concerns that some of the women have around their potential career advancement are quite real. It will be no easy task for these women to transition from non-professional to professional occupations, especially since they may be in midlife with little or no related work experience. Many employers may be less eager to offer mature African American women the opportunities to break out of support or lower level management positions. Mentors who can encourage and facilitate *pertinent experiences* while the women are pursuing their degrees might reduce the difficulties associated with career transitions. And, as mentioned throughout the literature, mentors help to confer "legitimacy" on the protege, a quality of which these newly graduated women will be sorely in need.

Based on these findings and in view of what is already known about mentoring, the following recommendations are offered with respect to mentoring among this population. First, there remains a critical need for more research on mentoring women, in general, and women of color, in particular. More in depth descriptive information is needed about black women students who have access to mentors, whether they are engaged in a mentoring relationship, the nature of such relationships, and the characteristics of the mentor and protege. More qualitative research is needed to deepen our knowledge of the dynamics, development, and effectiveness of mentoring relationships among this population.

Second, employers need to address this issue as it relates to their black, female employees on various levels. Ignoring the lack of mentor relationships among black women employees may result in losing valuable organizational talent. Employers should

pay particular attention to their black female workers who have demonstrated the self-direction and motivation to reenter college and persist toward the degree. These women, usually mature and in midlife, have demonstrated persistence, tenacity, and organizational skills as they balance work, school, and family. Also, these women are probably less likely to change jobs if they perceive real opportunities within their current organization.

Third, both institutions of higher education and employers should invest in establishing training programs on mentoring. Women need to learn more about how to establish, effectively use, and when to terminate mentoring relationships. Potential mentors need more information about meeting the needs of black women proteges, and, in the case of cross-sex pairings, how to defuse sexual innuendoes and office gossip as well as establishing a non-paternalistic, mentor-protege relationships with a female protege.

Mentoring can be a powerful mechanism toward achievement for African American reentry women. Research has shown that having a mentor is associated with becoming a mentor in the future (Jacobi, 1991). Cultivating mentoring relationships among these women is a first step toward broadening the pool of potential mentors for other women.

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